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SUBJECT: EU MINISTERS KEEN TO RAISE THE VISIBILITY
OF SOCIAL EUROPE

¶1. SUMMARY. EU ministers for Labor and Social Affairs in their February 22 Council meeting agreed on "key messages" for the March 8-9 European Council review of the "Lisbon Strategy" for Growth and Jobs. Though the dual approach of partnership and policy reform underpinning "Lisbon" was showing its positive impact, ministers recognized the "considerable delivery gaps" to address the fact that 17 million Europeans remain unemployed and 20 million new jobs must be created. To meet the Lisbon targets, EU countries should enhance "flexicurity" as a method of facilitating adjustment and easing transitions. The ministers also addressed demographic change in Europe: they recognized the contribution of older people to economic growth, employment and social development and backed the German Presidency's initiative underlining the importance of family-friendly policies to encourage a higher birth rate. Full text of Council conclusions is available from the Council website: <http://www.consilium.europa.eu>.
END SUMMARY.

PREPARATIONS FOR EUROPEAN COUNCIL: GROWTH AND JOBS

¶2. EU ministers for Employment and Social Affairs on February 22 adopted their contribution (in the form of a "key messages" paper) for the March 8-9 European Council review of the "Lisbon Strategy" for Growth and Jobs. Though the dual approach of partnership and policy reform underpinning the strategy was "showing its positive impact," the Council recognized that "considerable delivery gaps need to be bridged" to address the fact that 17 million Europeans remain unemployed and to create 20 million new jobs. The paper said member states should enhance "flexicurity" as a method of facilitating adjustment and easing transitions (Note: "flexicurity" is a model designed to adapt EU labor markets to global change by combining the easy hiring and firing --flexibility-- for employers and guaranteed social protection and training --security-- for employees between jobs) The Council also advocated a life-cycle approach to work; opportunities for people at the fringes of the labor market and investment in human capital.

¶4. German minister M|ntefering told a press conference a general consensus emerged among ministers on the need for "more visibility" of the

social dimension within the framework of Community actions with a view to the second cycle of the EU Growth and Jobs Strategy to be launched in 2008. Particular emphasis should be given to the importance of social cohesion and to "fighting the trans-generational transmission of poverty." The role of the social partners and of non-governmental organizations in promoting social cohesion was also highlighted. As customary a "Tripartite" Social Summit gathering the Council, the Commission and the EU Labor and Employers' organizations (the social partners) will take place before the "Spring" European Council meeting on March 8, 2007.

¶5. Among other documents to be forwarded to their leaders, ministers adopted joint (read: Council and Commission) reports on employment as well as on social protection and social inclusion:

-- The annual employment report, which assesses the implementation by the EU member states of their national reform programs in the area of employment, highlights that significant action has been carried out under the Lisbon priority to attract and retain more people in work. Progress has been made under the priority to raise investment in human capital with a slight increase in spending. However policy implementation to improve the adaptability of workers and companies is lagging behind. A set of country-specific recommendations was adopted with a view to contributing to effective delivery. More details available from:
<http://register.consilium.europa.eu/pdf/en/07/st06/st06076.en07.pdf>;

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-- The second document calls on member states to give priority to implementing comprehensive policies to fight child poverty, promote active inclusion and modernize pension provision and health and long-term care systems.

DEMOGRAPHIC CHANGE IN EUROPE

¶6. The Council also discussed the opportunities and challenges of demographic change in Europe, trying to identify political priorities to be addressed at European level. The aim was to explore how existing structures could support member state efforts and to discuss the possibility of developing a multi-annual approach, involving the upcoming Presidencies of the Council, to deal with the issue. In a public debate, the large majority of delegations agreed that the Lisbon Strategy and the "Open Method of Coordination" provided the framework within which member states should operate and that no new structures or instruments should be created; rather there should be increased coordination between existing structures including also the reporting mechanisms. Delegations backed the following priorities as outlined in a Presidency paper:

-Aging: recognizing the contribution of older people to economic growth, employment and social development;

-Harnessing public policies, social dialogue and corporate social responsibility for family friendliness: a factor for business location and the mobility of families;

-Human capital: promotion of the potential offered by well-educated and highly trained women in the workplace, as well as of a higher

employment rate for older people;

-Access to high quality care services both for children and the elderly;

-Reconciliation of family life and work, including flexible working-time arrangements and care responsibilities for children and the elderly;

-Migration: better opportunities for persons with migrant backgrounds, in particular children and young people;

-Strengthening both inter-generational solidarity and the social and cultural commitment of all age groups;

-The impact of demographic change on both local and regional infrastructure and social cohesion.

¶7. A number of member states also supported the Presidency's initiative, tabled by Federal minister for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth, for a European Alliance for Families underlining the importance of family-friendly policies that would encourage a higher birth rate. Here again, many ministers underlined the need to use existing structures to promote cooperation and mutual learning.

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